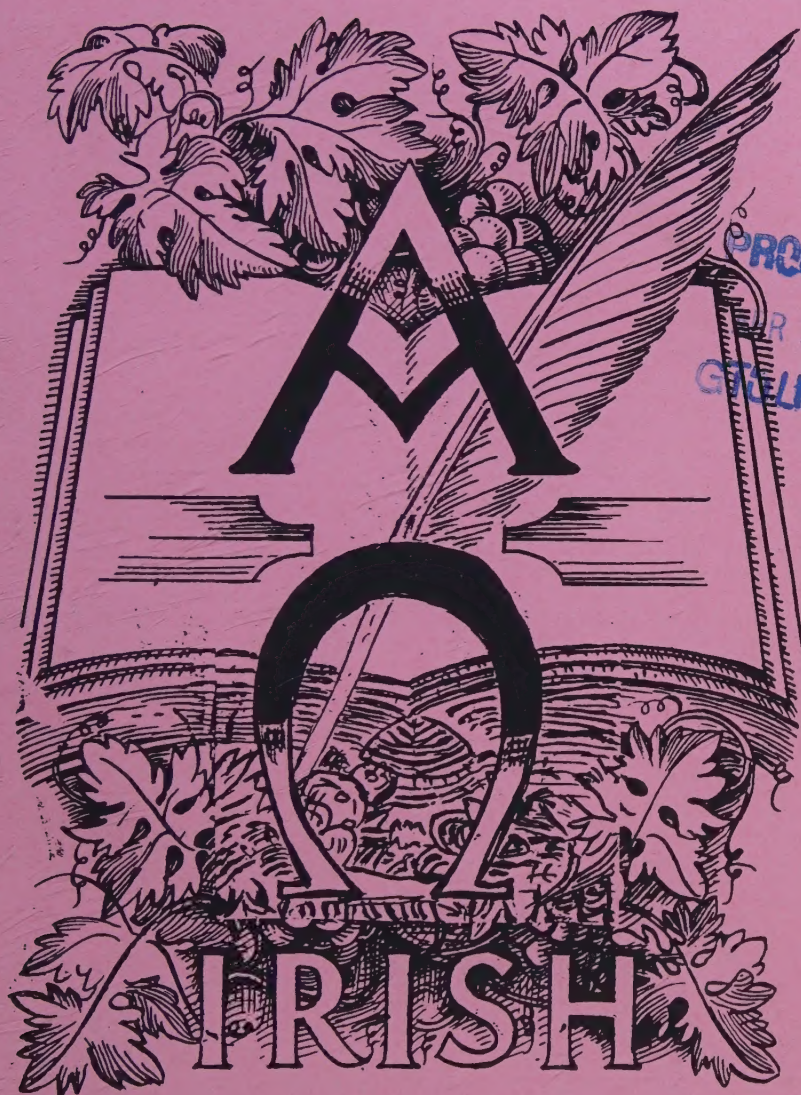


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ON THE MOTHERHOOD OF SARAH: A YAHWISTIC THEOLOGICAL COMMENT

Donald B. Sharp, S. J.

In the Yahwist's ancestral history (Gen 12-50), the reader finds a series of barren-wife narratives. These are sometimes looked upon as a literary technique used by the Yahwist to hold the interest of the audience by keeping it in suspense to impart a theological message: God's word is to be trusted and it will be fulfilled. The purpose of the essay is to explore another possible theological purpose: a theological comment stressing that the God Of Israel, not the Canaanite god Baal, was the true lord of Fertility.

Introduction

One of the more recognisable motifs found in the narratives of the Yahwist's ancestral history is that of the "barren-wife." These narratives, or composite narratives, as may be the case with the Rachel/Leah episode,¹ present a similar situation: the patriarch has been promised offspring,² but the matriarch is barren, a condition which is either expressly or implicitly mentioned.³ This situation, in turn, creates an all but insurmountable obstacle to the fulfilment of the promise of progeny.⁴ In each case, the matriarch's barrenness is removed, and YHWH grants her children.⁵

¹ Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, trans. John J. Scullion, S. J. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1985) 472.

² Abraham: Gen 15:4b; Isaac: 26:24b; Jacob: 28:14.

³ Sarah: 11:30; Rebekah: 25:21a; Leah: 29:31a; Rachel: 29:31b. In the case of Leah, it is not explicitly stated that she was barren, but only implicitly when the Yahwist comments that YHWH "... opened her womb. ..."

⁴ Peter Ellis, *The Yahwist: The Bible's First Theologian* (Notre Dame, IN: Fides Press, Inc., 1968) 137.

⁵ Sarah: Gen 21:1-2; Rebekah: 25:21b; Leah: 29:31-32; Rachel: 30:22. In the case of Rachel, the idiom used to express the return of her fertility (יָפְתָה אֶת־רִמּוֹהָ) is identical to that used with Leah with the

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The “barren-wife” motif of these narratives is often looked upon as a literary technique employed by the Yahwist to increase the suspense of the particular episode in order to hold the interest and attention of the audience. It is also seen as a device to impart a theological message to the people: the word of God is to be trusted and will be fulfilled.⁶ However, there is another possibility for the use of these “barren-wife” narratives: the traditions surrounding the stories of the barrenness of the matriarchal ancestresses were used by the Yahwist writer as part of a larger polemic against the religious cultic practices of Israel’s neighbours.⁷ The author, at least by insinuation, was underlining that it is YHWH alone, and no other god or goddess, who is responsible for granting offspring to the chosen people. In the cases of the matriarchs, the innuendo would have been that the true Israelite woman, devoted to the exclusive worship of YHWH, seeks fertility and children only from YHWH.⁸

The purpose of this study is to explore this last mentioned possibility for the use of the “barren-wife” motif in the life-story of Sarah. We will focus our attention on those narratives which

exception of the subject of the verb יָדָה פֶּסַח opens the womb of Leah and אָדָם does so in the case of Rachel. On this point, E. A. Speiser (*Genesis* [Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1964] 232) comments that, “The two documentary sources have been fused more intricately in this section than anywhere else in Genesis. . . . The eventual compiler did such a thorough job that redistribution at this time poses a delicate problem.” The general subject matter of the theme of fertility, however, appears to be more in the Yahwistic line of thought than of the Elohist. Hermann Gunkel (*Genesis* [7. Aufl.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1966] 336) assigns this particular phrase to the Yahwistic source.

⁶ Ellis 138.

⁷ For all practical purposes, we are talking about the syncretistic influences of the Canaanite people. However, we do not want to insinuate that the concern of the Yahwist writer was limited to Canaanite influences and none of the other peoples of the ancient Near East.

⁸ Ellis 140-41.

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surround Sarah's barrenness and the subsequent birth of Isaac.⁹ In so doing we intend to show that the Yahwist writer was making a two-fold theological comment in respect to the motherhood of Sarah: 1) YHWH's promise of offspring would be fulfilled even though, from a human perspective, there would seem to be no possibility of this; 2) the faithful Israelite is to avoid the practice of "surrogate motherhood" employed by Israel's neighbours. For the Yahwist such a custom, apparently adopted by the Israelites, showed a lack of trust and faith in the word of YHWH.

In order to accomplish our objective, we will begin with some very brief remarks which appear pertinent for our task at hand. These will be observations concerning the influence of foreign culture on Israel, the role of the Yahwist as a theologian, and the stigma of barrenness in the ancient Near East. Following these comments we will proceed with an examination of those narratives which treat Sarah's barrenness, attempted "surrogate motherhood," subsequent fertility, and, finally, conception and birth of Isaac.

THE THREAT OF RELIGIOUS SYNCRETISM ON THE YAHWISTIC CULT

Following the "conquest" and settlement in the land of Canaan, Israel's struggles were not over.¹⁰ The problems she probably faced would not necessarily have been the bellicose intentions of the local inhabitants, but, more likely, were of an ideological nature: combating the infiltration of cultic worship and practices of

⁹ Gen 16:1-6; 18:9-15; 21:1a, 2a.

¹⁰ It is beyond the scope of this study to resolve the question whether the "conquest" was the result of military action, immigration, or social revolution. For a thorough discussion on this topic see Frank S. Frick, *A Journey Through the Hebrew Scriptures* (New York: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1995) 258-75; Norman Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel, 1250-1050 B. C.* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979) 220-33.

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her neighbours, with all their corruptive influences, upon the Yahwistic system of belief.

During the era of the Israel's initial adjustment in Canaan, a natural consequence of the expansion movement would have been exposure to the cultural institutions, customs, and religious practices of those people who were presently occupying the land. Similarly, as Yahwism had entered the land of Canaan with the Israelites, it would have been only natural that some of the inhabitants of Canaan would have converted to the religious practice of the Israelites. Those who did, however, would, undoubtedly, have brought with them many of their former religious attitudes, customs, and rituals. Consequently, these "converts" would have had an influence upon the practice of ideal Yahwism, an influence which appears to have been rather extensive. John Bright succinctly summarises the situation when he notes, in light of Israel's earliest contact with a religious system different from her own, that "The Book of Judges is undoubtedly correct in recording the period [Israel's settlement in the land of Canaan] as one of theological irregularity."¹¹

THE YAHWIST AS THEOLOGIAN

The Yahwist writer was more than just a recorder of the history of Israel. He was, above all, a theologian who was concerned about the proper theological understanding and praxis of Israel's divinely revealed religion. As a theologian he presented to his contemporaries his understanding of the truths of revelation "in a language they could understand and in a form that reflected and responded to their needs, their problems, and their challenges."¹²

Using some of the traditional stories available, the Yahwist appears to have recorded them in such a manner so as to instruct the audience that the God of Israel was the true lord of fertility in the land given them through the promises made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. One way in which he accomplished this was by

¹¹. John Bright, *A History of Israel*, 3rd ed., Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 178.

¹². Ellis viii.

Sharp, **Motherhood of Sarah**, *IBS*, 20 Jan 1998 depicting to his audience that the obstacle of the barrenness of the ancestral matriarchs was overcome by YHWH in the fulfilment of the promise first made to Abraham that his own issue would be his heir (Gen 15:4b),¹³ and, subsequently, to the succeeding patriarchs that their offspring would be innumerable. It goes without saying that the barrenness of the wives of the patriarchs presented a serious obstacle to the fulfilment of God's promises.

THE STIGMA OF BARRENNESS IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

The condition of barrenness brought with it a social stigma, one of the greatest that a woman could bear in the various societies of the ancient Near East.¹⁴ Not only was it a cause of great sorrow for a woman, but also looked upon as disgrace (Gen 30:23; 1 Sam 1:5-8), and even as a punishment from God (Gen 20:18; 2 Sam 6:23; Hos 9:11). According to the anthropology of the patriarchal period, a woman could only find her self-identity within her society in bearing offspring for her husband. This was also the only way in which she could become a full and integrated member of her society.¹⁵

Consequently, it was customary for a woman to bring into marriage her own personal slave-girl,¹⁶ who appears to have belonged to her alone and was not at the disposal of her husband in

¹³ For a clear explanation of the Yahwist's use of "obstacle stories," see Ellis 136-38.

¹⁴ Gerhard von Rad (*Genesis*, [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961] 186) comments that, "There was no greater sorrow for an Israelite or Oriental woman than childlessness. Even today among the Arabs the barren woman is exposed to disgrace and even grievous wrongs." See also Antoin Jaussen, *Coutumes des Arabes au pays de Moab* (Paris: Librairie d'Amérique et d'Orient, 1948) 35-36; Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions*, trans. John McHugh (London: Darton, Logman & Todd, 1961) 41.

¹⁵ Westermann 239.

¹⁶ Westermann 238.

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the same manner as the other female servants in the household.¹⁷
Such a custom would assure the new bride that, in the event of
barrenness, she would still be able to “build” (בָּנָא) a family through
her personal slave-girl, whom she would give to her husband for
this purpose.¹⁸

It is in this social and cultural setting that the narratives
recording the problem of barrenness of Sarah is found, and,
perhaps, the reason for her great desire, or perhaps better, need, to
bear offspring to Abraham, even though it meant the use of a
“surrogate mother” appeared to her to be imperative.

SARAH, THE WIFE OF ABRAHAM

The Yahwist had informed the audience that Sarah was barren and
had borne no children (Gen 11:30),¹⁹ a condition that she herself
acknowledged came from YHWH: “You see that the Lord has
prevented me from bearing children; . . .” (16:2a).²⁰ The audience
is also told that Sarah had a slave-girl, an Egyptian named Hagar

¹⁷ . Gunkel 184. See also von Rad 191; Bruce Vawter, *On Genesis: A
New Reading* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1977) 214;
Westermann 238.

¹⁸ . The verb בָּנָה, “to build”, appears to be a play on words with בָּן
As it occurs in our text (Gen 16:2a), אֲבָנָה can only mean “I will be built
up,” a *niph'al* (so E. A. Speiser 117). The same idiom is also found in the
case of Rachel who gives her slave-girl to Jacob so that she can “build”
(אֲבָנָה) from her slave-girl (Gen 30:3). The usage of this term in this
manner appears to be confirmed by a text in Deut 25:9: “. . . This is what
is done to the man who does not build (לֹא יִבְנֶה) his brother’s house.” On
the figurative use of the term בָּנָה, see Siegfried Wagner, “בָּנָה *bānāh*,”
Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament, eds. G. Johannes Botterweck
and Helmer Ringgren; trans. David E. Green, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI:
Eerdmans, 1980) 172-73.

¹⁹ . This verse appears to be out of place and would logically fit in at
the beginning of chapter 16 in place of the Priestly Kodex insert (v. 1a).
See Gunkel 184.

²⁰ . The text of the *New Revised Standard Version* will be used
throughout unless otherwise noted.

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(16:1) whom, apparently, she had brought with her at the time of her marriage to Abraham, as was the custom of the day.

Because of her condition of barrenness, Sarah seeks a remedy: motherhood by means of a "surrogate." She tells Abraham to "... go in to my slave-girl; it may be that I shall obtain children by her" (16:2b), a proposal entirely in accord with both moral and legal customs of the day.²¹ However, once Hagar was aware that she was pregnant, the Yahwist presents a negative portrait of both women. Hagar, desiring to rise above her legal status of a slave-girl, is filled with pride and haughtiness toward her mistress, for "natural maternal pride is stronger than the legal status;"²² Sarah is presented to the audience as one who is consumed with anger, hostility, frustration, and maternal jealousy. (vv. 5-6).

Sarah's pride and self-respect had been injured, which was manifested in a most unjust manner: "May the wrong done to me (חַמַּס) be on you" (v. 5a).²³ The Yahwist has portrayed Sarah as a

²¹ That there existed such a custom and legal precedent of presenting a slave-girl in case of the wife's barrenness is generally agreed upon by all commentators and critics. The most well-known biblical example of this custom and legality is found in a document from Nuzi, a culture and legal system not unfamiliar to patriarchal/matriarchal society. The text reads: "If Gilimninu bears children, Shennima shall not take another wife. But if Gilimninu fails to bear children, Gilimninu shall get for Shennima a woman from the Lullu country (i.e., a slave girl) as a concubine. In that case, Gilimninu herself shall have authority over the offspring (*u šerri Gilimninu-ma uwar*)." It is outside the scope of this article to go into the minute details of this issue. For a complete discussion of this topic see Louis Katzoff, "From the Nuzi Tablets," *Dor le Dor* 13 (1985): 216-19; Speiser 120-21; John Van Seters, *Abraham in History and Tradition* (New Haven; London: Yale UP, 1975) 68-71; Vawter 214; Westermann 239.

²² Otto Procksch, *Die Genesis*, 3. Auf. (Leipzig: A. Deichertsche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1924) 107-8.

²³ On the use of the term חַמַּס, Speiser (117-18) notes that, "It is strictly a legal term, which traditional 'violence' fails to show adequately. The same force is reflected in the Akk. verb *habalum*, 'to deprive someone of his legal rights'..." Sarah is thus invoking her legal rights, and she holds her husband responsible (literally, 'my injustice is against you') for

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person whose reasoning may have been taken over by emotions. Sarah herself admits that she “put” Hagar into Abraham’s “embrace.” Nonetheless, she appears to deny any responsibility for the consequences of her action, insinuating that her loss of status and esteem in the eyes of Hagar was somehow brought about by Abraham (v. 5b).²⁴

All in all, the Yahwist has painted for the audience a less than complimentary portrait of Sarah. Having received Hagar back as her own personal slave-girl, Abraham tells Sarah that she can handle the situation as she thinks best: “. . . Your slave-girl is in your power; do to her as you please” (v. 6a).²⁵ In other words, Sarah was allowed freedom of action in her treatment of Hagar, but, apparently, unable to expel her outright.²⁶ Legally, however, Sarah does not appear to have been prevented from abusing Hagar to such a degree that she preferred to risk the dangers of the desert, though pregnant and alone, on her way back to Egypt, rather than to continue to submit herself to humiliation and mistreatment at the hands of Sarah.²⁷ Vawter’s appraisal of the manner in which the

the offence.” For a complete analysis of the term חָמָס, see Herbert Haag, “*חָמָס chāmās*,” *TDOT*, vol. 4, 478-87.

²⁴ J. Weingreen (“The Case of the Blasphemer [Leviticus XXIV 10 ff.],” *VT* 22 [1972]: 119-20) comments that, “The writer was referring, not to Hagar’s assumed arrogance towards her mistress but, to Sarah’s having lost status, because of the new standing which Hagar had acquired through her pregnancy. . . . It was, in fact, this loss of face which Sarah felt which impelled her to complain to Abraham . . . ‘I have become contemptible in her [Hagar’s] estimation.’” On the use of the term קָלַל, see J. Scharbert, “*קָלַל qll*,” *Theologische Wörterbuch zum Alten Testament*, eds. Heinz-Josef Fabry and Helmer Ringgen, 7 (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1989) 40-49.

²⁵ According to Gunkel (186) this phrase is also a legal term.

²⁶ Vawter (214) comments that, “The social and legal background presupposed by this story is . . . one that is not elucidated by the later Mosaic Law of Israel.” However, according to the *Code of Hammurabi* (§146), a legal code undoubtedly familiar to the patriarchal/matriarchal society, Sarah was forbidden to dismiss Hagar from the household.

²⁷ The term used to describe Sarah’s abusive behavior, the *pi’el* of עָנָה, is generally considered to suggest violent and excessive severity in

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Yahwist has presented Sarah in this situation accurately hits the mark. He comments that,

Legalities aside, however, it must be admitted that at least Sarah does not cut too happy a figure in the episode, neither in her recriminations over the development for which she herself was partly responsible and which was the miscarriage of a plan designed for her benefit than anyone else's, nor in the vengeful treatment of Hagar after the fact. The lot of a slave is never a happy one, and quite obviously Sarah had no wish to change that rule.²⁸

The Mamre Visitors: A Son is Promised

The resolution to the plight of Sarah—she had not yet borne her husband a son—and the fulfilment of the promise made by YHWH that his heir would be his own (Gen 15:4a) comes after Abraham and Sarah had grown old while settled at Mamre.²⁹ In the episode at Mamre (Gen 18:1-16a) the ancestral couple are visited by three mysterious strangers.³⁰ In the scene which unfolds, we find in this narrative,³¹ even more explicitly than in the Sarah/Hagar episode, the theological message of the Yahwist that YHWH is the true source of fertility and life.

Following the customary greeting and amenities bestowed upon strangers (Gen 18:1-8), the visitors inquire of Abraham,

the treatment of another. On the use of this term, see E. S. Gerstenberger, “**עֲנָה** ‘anah” *ThWAT*, 6, 247-70.

²⁸ Vawter 215.

²⁹ According to the Priestly chronology, Abraham was ninety-nine years old when Sarah conceived and bore Isaac (Gen 17:1, 24).

³⁰ The identification of the three visitors has long been a point of disagreement among biblical scholars. It is beyond the scope of this study to unravel their identity. For a complete discussion of this topic, see von Rad (204-05); Westermann (242-44, 275-76).

³¹ Granting that the narrative of the received text (18:1-16a) was originally two once-independent stories (so Westermann 275), we will treat it in its present form as a single narrative in which one of the visitors is eventually identified as YHWH

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“Where is your wife, Sarah?” Upon Abraham’s response that she was in the tent, one of the three, later to be identified as YHWH, assumes the roll of spokesperson, and comments, “I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son” (v. 10). This was the first explicit indication to Abraham that the travellers were not simply wandering Bedouins as they might first appeared to have been.

The Advanced Years of Abraham and Sarah

In the mentality of the ancient Near East, old age brought with it the cessation of the human potential for procreation. It was believed that a man in his old age no longer was virile, and the woman in hers, no longer fertile. Therefore, in stating that Abraham and Sarah were old, the Yahwist is informing the audience that, from this fact alone, the possibility of Sarah conceiving would be ruled out, and “. . . there was no longer any possibility of having an influence on the continuance of the family”³²

In the verses which follow the statement of the stranger that Sarah would bear a son, the obstacle of Sarah and Abraham’s age is underscored, mentioned three times (vv. 11-13). It would appear that the Yahwist intended to underline the fact that it was all but impossible, humanly speaking, for Sarah to conceive and bear a son.

The obstacle of the advanced age of the ancestral couple to the fulfilment of YHWH’s promise to Abraham is first mentioned by the Yahwist writer, informing the audience that the couple were now old (18:11). We find a very similar situation and statement recorded in the Second Book of Kings. Elisha informs the Shunammite woman that she will bear a son. Her reaction to the announcement was to take it in jest: “No, my lord, O man of God, do not deceive your servant” (2 Kgs 4:16). The narrator, (possibly the Yahwist?) makes the same comment as the Yahwist has done in our text: her husband is old (2 Kgs 4:14).

In order to stress even more emphatically the human impossibility of conception, the Yahwist now adds that Sarah was

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already in the post-menopausal time of her life (v. 11). Conception, therefore, was out of the question. Consequently, the only hope that remained for the fulfilment of the promise previously made to Abraham (Gen 15:4a) lies in the statement of the stranger who, with great assurance, had emphatically stated that Sarah would bear a son nine months hence.³³

Following his own statement that Sarah and Abraham were too old to bring a child into the world, the Yahwist repeats for the second time that it is virtually impossible for Sarah to conceive and bear a child. This time, however, the statement comes from Sarah. The Yahwist portrays Sarah as a very down-to-earth person. Her first reaction to what she has overheard the stranger tell Abraham is quite spontaneous and very human: she simply laughed to herself and silently comments, in a somewhat unrefined manner,³⁴ "Now that I have grown old (בָּלֵדָה)³⁵ and my husband is old, am I still to have pleasure (עֲרֵנָה)?"³⁶ (v.12), bemused by the thought of the possibility of conception.

³³ . On the meaning of this peculiar phrase (בָּעֵת חִידָה), see O. Loretz, "k'et hyh — 'wie jetzt ums Jahr' Gen 18:10," *Bib* 43 (1962): 75-78; Reuven Yaron, "ka'eth hayyah and koh lehay (Gen 18, 14; II Kg 4, 16-17," *VT* 12 (1962): 500-01; John Skinner, *Genesis* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1912) 310.

³⁴ . Gunkel 198.

³⁵ . The verb בָּלָה, which Sarah used to acknowledge her advanced years, would have been very graphic and, perhaps, to the audience, a bit comical. Literally, it means "to become worn out". It is not frequently used in the Old Testament and is found only on this occasion in Genesis. When this verb does appear elsewhere in the Old Testament, it is often in association with objects becoming worn-out as in the case of old clothes and garments (e.g., Deut 29:5; Is 50:9). On the use of this term, see J. Gameroni, " בָּלָה balāh," *TDOT*, vol.2, 128-31.

³⁶ . The term that Sarah is portrayed as using is עֲרֵנָה, from the root עֲרַן. This form occurs only here. Although the root implies that which is pleasurable, A. A. McIntosh ("A Third Root עֲרַן in Biblical Hebrew," *VT* 24 [1974] 472) is undoubtedly correct when he proposes the meaning "conception" following Pseudo-Jonathan.

For the third time the Yahwist returns to the human impossibility of Sarah conceiving and bearing a son. On this final occasion, the statement comes from the visitor, who once again is identified by the Yahwist as YHWH. He asks Abraham: "Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Shall I really bear a child, as old as I am?'" (v. 13). The Yahwist, however, has altered the words spoken by YHWH, interpreting for the audience the meaning of Sarah's statement, lest there be any doubt that she was too old to bear a child.

The culmination of this passage comes in verse 14 when YHWH asks, "Is anything too wonderful (וְאִפְּלָא)³⁷ for the Lord?" This rhetorical question clearly implies that no obstacle is too great for YHWH in the fulfilment of his promises. There follows immediately the restatement of the promise that Sarah would bear Abraham a son after nine months' time. The Yahwist's theological message is clear: nothing is too difficult for YHWH. Von Rad has captured very well the meaning of this phrase when he comments that, "The word (וְאִפְּלָא) reposes in the story like a precious stone in a priceless setting, and its significance surpasses the cosy patriarchal milieu of the narration; it is a heuristic witness to God's omnipotent saving will."³⁸ The promise has now been repeated twice, almost word for word, emphasising that, since YHWH is the Lord of Fertility, no obstacle was too great for him to overcome in fulfilling his promise to Abraham that Sarah would bear him a son.

The fulfilment of the promised son is found in Gen 21:1a, 2a. Little of the circumstances surrounding the birth of Isaac is known. Though the birth is reported in all three traditions, very little remains of the Yahwist's account of this event, following the final redaction of the compiler. It is simply stated: "The Lord took note of Sarah as he said he would . . . Sarah became pregnant and bore Abraham a son in his old age, . . ."

³⁷ . On the use of the term *pl'* see J. Conrad, "וְאִפְּלָא *pl'*," *ThWAT*, Bd. 6 (1989) 569-83.

³⁸ . Von Rad 202.

CONCLUSION

In this study we have investigated those stories which surrounded the barrenness of Sarah, her attempt to bear Abraham a son by the use of a “surrogate mother,” and, finally, the birth of Isaac. From our investigation, three observations can be made and a final conclusion drawn.

First, the condition of barrenness came from God, a result of divine decision and action. Sarah, at the outset of the narrative in Gen 16:1-6 explicitly acknowledged that this condition came from YHWH. Secondly, in Sarah’s attempt to bear a child by means of a “surrogate mother,” the Yahwist portrayed her relationship with Hagar and Abraham in somewhat of an unfavourable light, indicating a disruption of normal family relationships, in particular, irreconcilable differences between Sarah and her slave-girl. For the Yahwist the use of a “surrogate mother” to “bear children” was unacceptable: it showed a lack of faith in YHWH as the true God of Fertility in the fulfilment of the promise of offspring. Finally, the son whom Sarah bore was clearly a gratuitous gift from YHWH alone. Although she did not explicitly acknowledge YHWH’s role in the birth of her son, the Yahwist has presented the traditional materials in such a manner that there could be no doubt that Isaac was a direct result of YHWH’s intervention.

In light of the above observations, one may draw a final conclusion: it appears evident that the Yahwist makes it clear to his audience that the promised son was completely and entirely a gift from YHWH. The author has, no doubt, presented the traditions surrounding the promise and birth of Isaac, the future patriarch, as he had received them. But he also appears to have reinterpreted and presented them in such a manner so as to impart his own theological message and comment to his audience: YHWH is the true and only God of Fertility, the only god upon whom Israel should depend for the fulfilment of the promise of descendants and, consequently, the continuation and growth of the chosen people.

Donald B. Sharp, S. J.

THE FUTURE OF OUR RELIGIOUS PAST *

Stephen N. Williams

This article enquires about the relation between our religious past and our present situation in the Church. The religious past in question specifically concerns the Westminster Confession of Faith, the three hundred and fiftieth anniversary of which was celebrated in 1997. Three areas are addressed: (a) doctrine (b) ethics and (c) love. They correspond to the 'tests of life' set forward in 1 John, but 1 John sets the rubrics rather than provides the material for the article.

In 1603, the crowns of Scotland and England were united, thus propelling the new United Kingdom into a phase of existence which many of us think has begun to come to an end with the constitutional reforms presided over by Tony Blair. The path to the new ecclesiastical settlement, which secured a Protestant succession to the throne and the political settlement, which secured the union of Parliaments, lay through a Civil War, a Commonwealth and an Assembly at Westminster which produced a Confession of Faith, Catechisms and other documents. This year, in 1997, we commemorate the publication of that Confession.

To many in the Presbyterian Church in Ireland (PCI) and beyond, the achievement of the Confession is, if not theologically final in an absolute sense, at least theologically definitive in a practical sense; that is, it defines that to which theologically, and not just legally, the denomination is bound. It constitutes one of the glories of our religious past, and it remains crucial for our religious future. The precise status of the Confession, as far as

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denominational history is concerned (whatever may be the case in law) is controversial. It is a subordinate standard, but precisely to what one is bound and in what one is free, when it comes to subscription, is variously interpreted. I shall not be addressing that particular issue; I am not competent to do so in all respects, and it would be inappropriate to do so on this occasion. In any case, the relatively narrow question of what subscription strictly involves is far less important for the Church than the question of our attitude towards our heritage, and our appropriation of it in the present and for the future. At stake in Irish (and other) Presbyterianism(s) today is the question of whether we so appropriate our religious past that it helps to liberate the Church of today to be faithful to her living Head, or that it shackles, retards and impedes our development and witness. What is written in the Confession is written, and what is done is done; but its future, as an instrument of liberation or impediment, is open.

Many years ago, Robert Law wrote a book on 1 John, titled *The Tests of Life*.¹ Law's thesis was that the literary structure of that epistle was governed by three themes, which give us the tests of Christian life. These are (a) doctrine, (b) behaviour and (c) attitude. Without following the themes as Law or John develop them, I want to organize what I have to say under these three heads so that the fainthearted who fear that a radical note sounds through in the previous paragraph may take comfort in the appearance of submissive traditionalism.

The Future of Doctrine

The distinctive doctrinal feature of the Westminster Confession of Faith (henceforth WCF) is normally taken to be its Calvinism or, if you like, its Augustinianism. The noteworthy form taken by its Calvinism is the belief in the divine foreordination of all that happens, which in general refers to the entire providential order and in particular refers to the determination of the destinies of both the elect and the reprobate. Sometimes it is alleged that, while Calvin himself and the WCF held substantially the same position on this

¹ Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1909

Williams, **Future of our Religious Past**, *IBS* 20 (1998) matter, it all has a prominence in the WCF that it lacks in Calvin, a prominence that makes the doctrine of the divine decrees the cornerstone of the theological structure of the Confession. So it would seem that fidelity to the WCF in contemporary Presbyterianism entails at the least the adoption of its Calvinist understanding of predestination or foreordination.

Nevertheless, as a major contemporary commentator on post-Reformation Calvinism, Richard Muller, is anxious to point out and as, indeed, was pointed out ages ago by a classical commentator like Alexander Mitchell, it is a mistake to think that the WCF spins out its theology on the foundation of its understanding of divine foreordination. The foundation of theology in the WCF, in Calvinist dogmatics of the seventeenth century, and in Calvin himself, is Scripture. The first chapter of the Confession is 'Of the Holy Scripture' and we do not meet reference to the counsel and immutable will of God until chapter 2. '...In all controversies of religion, the Church is finally to appeal to them [i.e., the Scriptures]'. (1.8). 'The Supreme Judge, by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in Scripture' (1.10). Note 'all...councils'. It logically includes the Assembly's own theology, spelled out in the WCF. The first step taken by the divines was to relativize all other steps. They located authority outside their own Confession. Let us remember that, if ever an Assembly took care with its formulations, it was the Westminster Assembly. Further, the evidence is that they took particular care with this chapter. So the first and deliberate step taken by the Westminster divines was to deflect attention from the authority of their own Confession in the life of the Church and nation. The national context is important: the divines did their work under Parliament in the service of establishing a national Church. The stakes were very high indeed. The Code of the PCI reflects the view of Scripture taken by the divines, in describing Holy Scripture as the only infallible rule of faith and practice, and saying that it is not only our right and privilege, but our duty to bring doctrine to the

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bar of Scripture. The obligation to be faithful to the WCF pales in comparison to the obligation to test the WCF by Scripture. If anyone denies that, they deny the foundational chapter of the WCF. While the WCF does not say, with the Scots Confession, that it would welcome correction at any point, from the Scriptures, there is no doubt that this is the position.

This point may seem so obvious that it is not worth making. But I think that it is. We need to grasp the radicalism of the principle in question. It was one of the Reformers' greatest gifts to the Church to encourage, from a logical point of view, the following principle: doctrine must be open, not closed. It fell to Calvin to imply this logic most clearly and systematically in Book 1 of the Institutes, dealing with Holy Scripture. Of course, the point must not be misunderstood. The Reformers were eager to show that they adhered to the mighty trinitarian and christological formulations of the early councils of the undivided Church. By 'doctrinal openness', I do not mean that the Reformers were saying that the Church was free to revise its belief in the incarnation, for example. But it is important to see why the Church has not that freedom. It is not ultimately because the doctrine of the incarnation is enshrined in the teaching of the Council of Chalcedon, or any Council, weighty and important as that one undoubtedly was. It is because incarnation is, they held, clearly taught in Scripture. Doctrinal openness means, then, openness to the teaching of Scripture, whatever Pope, Church, tradition, council...or WCF, may say.

Let me give an example of what applying this principle might mean, and give it not in order to provoke - which would be ungodly - but to relate the matter to the WCF in particular. In our century, renewed biblical exegesis forces us to think again about the doctrine of election - even if we conclude as did the Westminster divines. It may be held that (a) in the Old Testament, the community is elect, but this does not guarantee the salvation of individuals within it; (b) election is designed not to mark off a people ultimately for an exclusive privilege, but to be exclusively privileged for the sake of wider blessing; (c) one should understand the New Testament concept of the election of the Church in line

Williams, **Future of our Religious Past**, IBS 20 (1998) with the Old Testament notion of the election of Israel; (d) Romans 9-11, the locus classicus of the Calvinist theology of predestination, actually has little to say on the personal destiny of individuals (Esau personally may well have been saved, though he was not elect) and is concerned with the historical purposes of God. All of this may be contentious, and I am not directly interested right now in the doctrinal debate. What we must say is that on this understanding of things, the theology of the WCF would need to be adjusted, even though you might actually find yourself correcting the overall perspective of the Confession and adjusting, rather than denying, double predestination.²

Now, should the PCI feel free to do that? I believe that the divines would have opened their eyes wide with horror at such a question. The Church has an obligation to exercise such freedom...if it is convinced on a matter, by Scripture. If the divines thought that a Church three and a half centuries on was refusing to countenance putting their doctrine of election to a biblical test by doing its own exegesis, and felt bound a priori by the teaching of the Confession, they should have been deeply chagrined. They laboured hard in exegesis, using everything they knew about the text. They laboured to set us an example in labouring under the authority of Scripture, not to save us the trouble. With one voice they cry out to us: 'Your authority is not the results of our exegesis. It is sola Scriptura.'

Of course, this state of affairs, if it really obtains, is problematic. For it appears to mean that a Church committed to the WCF should feel free, in principle, to revise all of it, except, perhaps, chapter 1. Much could be said here that space does not permit me to say. So let us be blunt and brief. It seems to me that the WCF does commit us to the principle of willingness to revise. *Ecclesia reformata semper reformanda* - the truly Reformed Church must always go on being reformed and whatever the historical scope or reference of these words, we have no logical right to exempt doctrine from this process, within the Protestant

² Though we shall not go here into how and why that might be the case.

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communions. The Protestant quarrel with Rome is twofold: it is mistaken in its soteriology, and it shackles the Church with sources of authority that are supplementary to Scripture. It would be ironic if we appealed to the WCF to distance ourselves from the Roman Catholic (or other) communion, in such a way that we gave its teaching a binding and authoritative status in the life of the Church in exactly the way we criticize Rome (e.g.) for doing.

Some readers may be asking what my agenda is here. Am I out to do a hatchet job on the WCF? No. The agenda is clear and open. In our religious past, an English body framed a Confession of Faith for us. What is its future, specifically the future of its doctrine? I do not know; but I know the future that it ought to have. Our religious past ought to liberate the Church to do its own task of exegesis. If our exegesis leads us into uncertainty, so be it. God has not called us all to doctrinal certainty on everything all of the time, but to live in the light of his Word. If our exegesis leads us to question the conclusions of the divines, however exactly we should deal with such a situation formally in our Church, the divines would all say: 'Fine by us - if you read the Minutes of our meetings, you would see how much time we spent in questioning each other.' If our exegesis leads us to exactly the same conclusion as the divines, well and good - but let us persuade people on the relevant points out of Scripture, not just out of the Confession. Of course, we shall not be much of a match for the divines in their intellectual and theological abilities. But the Church learns new things from Scripture as the centuries roll on, and there is nothing arrogant in the little child perched on her father's mighty shoulders saying that she can see things which daddy can not.

The Future of Behaviour

.... Or the question of ethics. This year (1997) is the centenary of an extremely interesting set of lectures delivered by the eminent Scottish Free Church theologian, James Orr, subsequently published under the title, *The Progress of Dogma*.³ Here, Orr maintained that the Church, in the course of her history, came to a

³ London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1901

Williams, **Future of our Religious Past**, *IBS* 20 (1998) deeper understanding of particular doctrines at different times, not randomly, as though doctrinal insights in the Church have no logical progression, but according to a logical principle. So, e.g., the doctrines of Trinity and Incarnation were worked out in some detail in the Early Church; the atonement and justification by faith in medieval times and the sixteenth century respectively (by Anselm and the Reformers), because Trinity and Incarnation are the basis of the doctrines of atonement and justification. In 1897, Orr thought that developments were to be expected in the Christian understanding of eschatology, but he concluded his volume by predicting that in the twentieth century, the most important theological developments would come not in doctrine, but in ethics. The main doctrinal positions may be modified, but not changed much; now, however, was the time for the Church to engage in

‘. . . another and yet more difficult task before it, if it is to retain its ascendancy over the minds of men. That task is to bring Christianity to bear as an applied power on the life and conditions of society; to set itself as it has never yet done to master the meaning of “the mind of Christ,” and to achieve the translation of that mind into the whole practical life of the age - into laws, institutions, commerce, literature, art; into domestic, civic, social, and political relations; into national and international doings - in this sense to bring in the Kingdom of God among men. I look to the twentieth century to be an era of Christian Ethic even more than of Christian Theology.’ (p.353)

To this kind of suggestion, the divines, I am sure, would have been entirely hospitable.⁴ Their main job - a tough one, brought about by a crisis in the question of the form of the Church in England - was to reform the Church as the Church of the nation. In their concern for the godly reformation of society, they were typically Calvinist, since such concern is arguably the heart and the distinctive feature of historical Calvinism. The fact that they had a

⁴ The divines might have conceded the logic of doctrinal openness in principle, but might also have been delighted with a thesis like that of Orr which would allow them to foreclose certain questions in practice!

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responsibility which is not ours - to give form to a national Church - should not deflect our attention from the need to share their concern: the godly reformation of society under the Word of God. Of course, we live in a different religiously and morally pluralistic context, and we see the emergence of concern for socio-religious toleration at the time of the Westminster Assembly when the Independents found themselves beginning to argue for toleration. Our general social ambitions, however, are surely comparable and compatible.

When we come to Abraham Kuyper's work at the end of the last century (Kuyper was Professor of Theology at the Free University at Amsterdam prior to becoming Prime Minister in the Netherlands) we encounter an exceedingly robust and vigorous statement of the genius of Calvinism. Calvinism, Kuyper held, is the salvation of society, not by proclaiming a narrow gospel of individual redemption, but by striving for the glory of God in every known sphere of human activity.⁵ Whatever we make of Kuyper's thesis, in its principle or its detail, he is undoubtedly faithful to the broad vision shared by Calvin and the Westminster divines. Yet, for some reason, we have often proved much better at articulating our doctrinal positions than we have at articulating a social ethic that comprehends the whole business of life. Let me suggest four reasons why that is so. (This is not a profound or rigorous analysis of what I guess is a complex phenomenon. I am being highly selective.)

1. Our doctrine, and not our ethics, generally constitutes what is distinctive in the Reformed tradition...and we have concentrated on our distinctives. Calvinism has always claimed to be authentic Christianity. If that is the case, love for God and love for neighbour should be at the heart of Calvinism. Yet one is not likely to hear Calvinism defined in these terms, certainly not love for neighbour. Why not? Because Lutheranism, Catholicism, Liberal as well as evangelical theologies, may all say that the love of God is central. So may Judaism, Islam, certain strands of Hinduism and, as far as love for neighbour

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Calvinism (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1943)

Williams, **Future of our Religious Past**, *IBS* 20 (1998) goes, irreligious humanists may say it too. This leads us to make, I believe, a big mistake. Because a certain belief is formally shared by the non-Reformed, we tend to marginalize it rather in our thinking. Yet love for neighbour, like love for God, is Christianly central and ought, therefore, to be Calvinistically central as well. Sadly, however, people associate Calvinism not with what is central to Christianity, but with what is distinctive to Calvinism. Now, of course, in Reformed perspective, Calvinist distinctives may be judged central to authentic Christianity. But the point is that what is undoubtedly central to Christianity- the love of neighbour - often gets short weight in Calvinism, because it is not, formally, one of the distinctives. Hence Christian social ethics, as the social outworking of love for God and neighbour, may receive comparatively little attention.

2. We are happier with what we regard as doctrinal certainties than with what we regard as ethically difficult areas. Medical ethics, e.g., raises profound issues about our humanity and in an intellectually vital area of social engagement because our medical structures and institutions, as we know, play an extremely important role in social formation. Yet anyone who has seriously entered the arena of medical ethical reflection will know how complex some of these issues are in Christian or any other perspective. Hence we are forced to live with intellectual uncertainties though we are also forced to act. And we find it easier, of course, to live with intellectual certainties. Now, of course, only some in the Church need engage with any particular set of issues, such as issues in medical ethics and I believe that we can have a legitimate certainty on some points of doctrine that eludes us on certain quandaries in ethics. Nevertheless, both as individual Christians and as a Church, we can not easily neglect the personal or collective task of working out some principles of social ethics on a good theological basis, and retreat, instead, to the security of what we take to be dogmatic certainties.
3. We frequently entertain unbalanced ideas of ministry and ministerial authority. Shortly after arriving in Northern Ireland

over three years ago, a short paper was passed on to me by a lapsed Presbyterian academic. His thesis was that Christianity is in crisis, because the world in which we live is very specialized, and the Church can not speak with authority in most of the areas in which human life is lived out. Several responses are possible to this challenge. Let us, however, acknowledge what is important in the point being made. It is quite true that the individual minister can not speak authoritatively on different areas, other than by setting forth broad biblical principles that should undergird our thinking and action - a task, however, that many lay persons can and should also be able to perform. The one we call 'minister' ought to release members of the body of Christ to do their own thinking about the sphere in which they are called to work. 'The sphere in which they are called to work'...one is not expecting church members to devise a comprehensive social ethic, just to think about the ethical issues in their sphere, exactly as they think so hard, so penetratingly and so willingly about their summer holidays, their children's schooling and the best way to dress in the choir. We are dealing here with some unfinished business of the Reformation and seventeenth century. The role of the laity (a word as infelicitous as the word 'minister') in the Church needs transformation, and we badly need this if the task of Christian ethics is to be undertaken properly.

4. This final point is made hesitatingly and tentatively, but I am taking the risk. Is it the case that excessive preoccupation with the political aspects of life in Northern Ireland is impeding the task of constructing a social ethic? In the past, rather more than in the present, I have been involved in the field of medical ethics. People outside Ireland, North and South, struggling to articulate and activate a perceived Christian position on euthanasia, abortion or genetic engineering, envy the situation in Ireland, where different socio-legal conditions obtain than is the case in other parts of Europe. But these people worry, for here law, instincts and public feeling - though some of this is rapidly changing - are in a relatively strong position to defend certain ethical principles in medicine. Yet the perception is that we

Williams, **Future of our Religious Past**, *IBS* 20 (1998) quarrel, divide, do not co-operate or offer limited co-operation, or are relatively indifferent in the battle. Social objectives are obscured by more narrowly political ones. Generally - and forgetting medicine in particular - it is as though a proportionately high level of intellectual energy gets discharged in relation to political conflict which, of course, is also literally a matter of life and death - high, that is, in proportion to the thought expended over the broader social area. Unionists may eventually succeed in politically securing the Union; Nationalists may eventually succeed in achieving a united Ireland. In either case, our social institutions and ethos could be a mess; and what does it profit us to gain our territory while the life-soul is drained out of the body politic? Our religious past will not have a bright future if we abnegate our socio-ethical responsibility.

It seems to me, though I can not dwell here on the reasons for believing this, that the credibility of Christianity in the future has a lot to do with our ability to frame and live by coherent social perspectives, ethics and policies. Certainly, its perceived socially oppressive nature is one of the main obstacles people have with Christianity. Now gospel and cross are indeed scandal and folly. But it would be a scandal if it were our folly that inhibited the Church from doing honour and justice to the name of Christ in the formation of socio-ethical thought.

The Future of Attitudes

John, in his first epistle, provides three tests of life: doctrinal, behavioural and attitudinal. Under the bland word 'attitude' I am referring to 'love'. It is to John that we owe the momentous sentence: 'God is love' (and, indeed, 'God is light'). What John has to say about love is almost unbelievable. '...If we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us' (1 John 4.12). The love of Almighty God finds its temporal destiny in the human person, in the Christian Church. Think of it! Now although, in the johannine writings, the emphasis is chiefly on love for fellow-Christians, such love is obviously rooted in love for neighbour in a comprehensive sense, for we have been designed to be relational

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individuals, not self-contained people who happen to relate to others. Our ontological constitution is essentially relational. So love is not like a tap that can be switched on and off. If it truly exists in the heart, its range is potentially unlimited.

When we speak of love, we - certainly I - should do so with some considerable embarrassment, since most of us are manifest failures. We avoid the clear teaching of Scripture about love as the test of whether, indeed, we have life. We frequently find the doctrinal test, and perhaps the test of externally correct behaviour, rather easier to pass. In the eighteenth century, G.E.Lessing wrote *Nathan the Wise*. A father makes a ring that has the property of making its owner beloved by God and fellow-humans. He gives it to one of his sons. But he has three sons, so he makes copies of the ring for the other two. The rings get passed down through the generations before a dispute breaks out about which descendant has the authentic ring. How can it be resolved? The creator of the ring can not be consulted and there is insufficient documentary evidence to establish the facts. There is no way of proving and telling who is right. No way? There is, of course, one way. The ring has the power of making its owner beloved by God and other human beings.

What was the point of the parable of the rings? There are three sons and there are three great monotheistic religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Each claims divine foundation. No one can settle the dispute by producing some decisive evidence. God can not be interviewed on the matter. But you could prove the truth of your religion by your love. For love, Lessing thinks, is the quality in us which makes us beloved by God and our co-humanity.

It is interesting, over two hundred years after Lessing's play, to examine the writings of a figure like John Hick, a theologically radical philosopher of religion. Hick notices that several world religions emphasize the centrality of love. They seem to differ radically in their views on God or Ultimate Reality and it is difficult to settle some of the differences between them. So what about their performance, the track record of their love? According to Hick, as far as anyone can tell, there is little difference there too. In my judgement, there is a great deal wrong with Hick's argument. But he certainly pulls us up.

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The importance of love, of course, can not easily be brought out in a Confession, though it may be easier to do so, in principle, in a Catechism. But we need to beware of the danger of thinking that because our religious past is marked in such a clear credal fashion, our religious future is secure, without acknowledging that love should dominate the Christian life. Love seems to be in terrifying recession. There is a desperate search on for love, the more desperate because often unacknowledged. In the nineteenth century, Arthur Schopenhauer argued that the sole root of all virtue and morality was love, which springs from us naturally in the form of compassion for those who suffer. He was opposed by the influential and violently anti-Christian, Nietzsche, who claimed that compassion is culturally engendered and conditioned. According to Nietzsche, the fundamental raw reality about humans is their will to maximize their own power. I fear that Nietzsche was largely right, certainly in relation to the male sex, and that his semi-predictions of a society which would get rid of God, then of objective morality, then of compassion, were uncannily accurate.

All this surely means that where, in our religious past, the seventeenth century divines concentrated on the structure of the Church and the gifts of the 'ministry' rather than the 'laity', we must - without neglecting those things - concentrate rather on the nature of the Church and the gifts to the whole body of Christ. Love, Paul tells the Colossians, binds into perfect unity (3.14). At least two things are entailed by our agenda.

1. Renewed interest in the congregational pattern of church life. I do not mean that Presbyterians should become Congregationalists, but we should attend to the congregational element within the Presbyterian tradition and within the biblical view of the Church. Patterns of mobility, work and leisure create a real problem for fostering a sense of congregational community both in cities and, now, often in rural areas. But surely we can not avoid making the attempt. The love which is a test of life is the sign of life primarily through the local congregation. Earlier, we touched on the transformation of social structures, but there are reasons to suppose that vital

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congregational life is relatively far more effective in social transformation than we often think.

2. Renewed interest in the diversity of gifts in the Church. We have got into deep trouble with our notions of ministry. God gave the Church some apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers. We, on the other hand, believe that God has lodged in one person the gifts of evangelist, pastor, teacher, not to mention administrator, youth leader etc. Not only do we require diversity in leadership; the fact is that the gifts of the Spirit are simply not given to one leader. They are given to the body, the Church, out of which some, with particularly relevant gifts, emerge as leaders. All this is pertinent as we speak of love, for love can only function effectively when we get a true sense of what we are and where we are in the body of Christ and its God-given diversity. Even more radical, I believe, than Paul's teaching on unity and on diversity, is his teaching on the equality of the members of the body (1 Corinthians 12.11ff implies it). None is more important than any other. And although, in saying this, we are emphasizing things not emphasized at the Westminster Assembly, we are unquestionably consistent with the divines and the Confession. The powerful Confessional emphasis on sovereign grace entails a radically egalitarian principle. Our ecclesiological past has a future if, and only if, we proceed to a view of the Church which emphasizes our third test of life and teases it out in the terms that I have suggested.

All this is, or should be, humdrum. No blueprint is on display. We are really speaking of the Church as the creature of the Spirit. When you look at the statistics of church growth and hear its story in contemporary times, you are struck by the rise of Pentecostalism, Neo-Pentecostalism, charismatic renewal and variations on these themes. It is an astonishing phenomenon and I admire anyone, be he or she for or against it, who can well understand what is going on. However we react to this phenomenon - favourably, unfavourably or mixed - it is unquestionably beneficial to have our minds turned to think about the Holy Spirit in

Williams, **Future of our Religious Past**, *IBS* 20 (1998) the Church (and, for that matter, in the world). One hears complaint that the Westminster Assembly omitted from its Confession any chapter on the Holy Spirit, but the complaint is, I believe, misplaced: the Puritans were great theologians of the Holy Spirit. What we must not do is to deny our religious past its future in the next millennium, by using it to block the path of the Spirit. I have in mind here no particular point in the past (at no juncture have I taken issue with the teaching of the Confession) but, rather, a particular relationship to the past. The divines strove to hear what the Spirit was saying to the churches in their day; we must do the same for ours.

If one is afraid of a destructively life-threatening gale force wind, it is wise to close the windows, seal the doors and block access. But to deny entry to any winds out of fear that they may blow some things away and change the atmosphere of the air, would be folly. The Spirit must blow where he wills. We must not fear the destruction of our foundations, for the builder of the house is God and his Spirit will not upset his building. He may, however, upset ours, which is a different matter. All this is trite enough. What is meant is this: the appropriation of our religious past must go hand in hand with, and be subordinate to, the living Lord who is the Spirit. If we deeply value our religious past, including the labours of the 'Assembly of the Lord', we will permit the Spirit to move in accordance with, beyond or in a different direction to it, as he wills. We should do so out of obedience to the same Lord obeyed by our illustrious forefathers.

Stephen N. Williams

ANTI-SEMITISM IN HEBREWS?

J. C. McCullough

In Memory of Rev. Professor E.A.Russell, born 29th November 1916, died 20th March 1997, who gave so much of his life to the building of relationships between Jews and Christians.

The Epistle to the Hebrews offers a sustained *critique* of the Judaism of his day. It is, however, a *critique* from within and is given to protect his Christian community from the dangers of assimilation back into Judaism. While Hebrews can be and has been used in anti-Jewish polemic, it would be unfair to describe it as anti-Jewish.

The purpose of this article is to examine the question of anti-Semitism in Hebrews.¹ Before tackling the question directly, however, some attempt must be made at a definition of the term and assessment of the appropriateness of its use in this essay. The term 'anti-Semitism', if considered strictly from an etymological point of view is clearly inappropriate as it should refer to hatred of all Semite people, of whom Jews are one example. It is a term to describe race and, according to S. Sandmel, it emerged towards the end of the 19th Century in the writings of William Marr as a result of a mingling of notions about race and nationalism.² As such it has, in recent years, taken on a more specialized, almost technical meaning as it is used to denote that particular form of anti-Judaism which was so obvious in, but not limited to National Socialism in the Third Reich. This anti-Semitism was described by Mr. Alex Jaffe in a lecture to the CCJ Branch in Belfast as having its purpose to 'degrade Jews by removing their civil, political, social, economic and religious rights.' It is a particularly vicious form of racism or

¹ One of the enduring passions of Professor Russell's life was his deep concern to foster good relations between Jews and Christians. He did this both at a personal level through various local dialogue groups and at an academic level through public lectures and the publications of articles, including one article entitled 'Anti Semitism in Matthew'.

² Cf. S. Sandmel, *Anti-Semitism in the New Testament?* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978) p. xx.

McCullough, **Anti-Semitism in Hebrews**. IBS 20 Jan 1998 group prejudice which has been especially rampant amidst the insecurities of the twentieth century.³ It is clear that this more specialized use of the term is not appropriate for the first century C.E., though some scholars, while acknowledging this fact, still use the term because other terms 'simply have not caught on'.⁴

The term Anti-Judaism, or anti-Jewish polemic, on the other hand, is more appropriate as it refers to attempts to denigrate Judaism and present an unfair and wholly erroneous caricature of it. It is similar on an interfaith level to sectarianism on an inner Christian level. It does not rule out serious engagement and even disagreement with Judaism, without which knowledge could never advance but rather the hatred and vilification of Jews as Jews. As such it blurs the distinction between Christian criticism of Judaism and Christian bitterness against Jews,⁵ and refuses to take seriously the other's position or to gain 'an understanding of the depth and sensitivities of religious commitment' of Judaism.⁶ To assess the anti-Judaism of the Epistle would be to ask the question: is the author attacking Judaism in such a way that he is denying the religious and theological legitimacy of Judaism and thus questioning the right of Jews to exist ... a position which was taken

³ There have been many important studies of this phenomenon particularly since the Second World War. One of the earliest was the work of an American Symposium entitled *The Jew in the Gentile World* ed. Isacque Graeber. Cf. James Parkes, *Antisemitism*, (London: Valentine, 1963).

⁴ Sandmel, p. xx1. '... the nineteenth and twentieth-century word *anti-Semitism* is a completely wrong term when transferred to the first and second centuries. Yet wrong as it is, it has been and continues to be used in connection with Christian hostility to Jews. Scholars have proposed other terms: *Anti-Jewish* or *Anti-Judaism*. These terms are better because they are correct; they simply have not caught on. In this book we use 'anti-Semitism' consciously, aware of how wrong the term is'.

⁵ cf. Sandmel, p. xix. 'Granted that Jews and Judaism are intertwined, we shall go astray if we are not alert to the valid distinction between Christian criticism of Judaism and Christian bitterness against Jews'.

⁶ cf. Code of Practice of the Council of Christians and Jews, paragraph 2 (August 1996).

up with devastating effect by the Third Reich, or is he conducting a theological *critique* of Judaism and if so, is it a fair *critique*?

Before considering this question, several preliminary question must be faced. The first concerns the nature of Christianity which according to some scholars is fundamentally and structurally anti-Semitic.⁷ Rosemary Ruether, for example, would argue that anti-Judaism is the left hand of Christology and raises the question 'is it possible to say "Jesus is Messiah" without implicitly or explicitly saying at the same time "and the Jews be damned"'.⁸ If Ruether is correct, then, of course, all the New Testament which is concerned with Christology is anti-Semitic and must be 'ent-antijudaisiert'.⁹ If anti-Judaism is defined as the holding of Christological beliefs then naturally Hebrews is guilty on that count and the answer to the title of the essays is an unequivocal 'yes'. However, it is our assumption that while Christological claims may be expressed in an anti-Jewish or anti-

⁷ Part of the basic structure of Christianity cf. Stegemann, E, 'Der Jude Paulus und seine antijüdische Auslegung' in *Auschwitz -- Krise der christlichen Theologie* (ACJD 10, München 1980) 117-139 esp. P. 117 and Osten-Sacken, P, 'Vom Nutzen des Judentums für die Kirche' in *Anstösse aus der Schrift* (Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1981) 142.

⁸ R.Ruether, 'Anti-Semitism and Christian theology' in *Auschwitz -- Beginning of a New Era? Reflections on the Holocaust* (New York, 1977) 79-92 (79); cf. too her *Faith and Fratricide: The theological roots of Anti-Semitism* (New York: Seabury, 1974) p. 246 and Eckhardt, A.Roy, *Jews and Christians; The Contemporary Meeting* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986). For a discussion of Ruether cf. Thomas A. Indinopulos and Roy Bowen Ward 'Is Christianity inherently Anti-Semitic?' *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 45 (June 1977) 193-214 who argue that anti-Judaism was not an element in earliest Christianity but the result of a **development** in New Testament Theology.

⁹ Stegemann, E, 'Der Holocaust als Krise christlicher Theologie' in *Auschwitz -- Krise der christlichen Theologie*, Stegemann, E & R.Rendtorff (editors),(ACJD 10, München 1980) 1409-158 154f. Cp. Klein, G., 'Christlicher Antijudaismus: Bemerkungen zu einem semantischen Einschüchterungsversuch', *ZTHK* 79 (1982) 411-450 who speaks of 'semantic intimidation'.

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Semitic way and may be used in anti-Jewish or anti-Semitic propaganda, nevertheless they are not in themselves necessarily either racist or sectarian. In other words, we must examine, not whether the author expresses a Christology, but rather how he expresses that Christology.

A second preliminary point which must be addressed is the question of the influence of the book throughout Christian history. Is the author of the epistle guilty of anti-Semitism if his readers have used his book for their anti-Jewish propaganda? This is a particularly important topic and one that has been dealt with in connection with all of the New Testament by many scholars.¹⁰ ~clearly a writer must take some responsibility for his writings but can she or he be held responsible for every distorted interpretation or misuse of it? There has been massive anti-Jewish use made of Hebrews in Christian history, but the question of this essay is: does Hebrews itself contain such vicious anti-Judaism that it makes such use of it inevitable.

What then is the attitude to Judaism which comes through in the Epistle? Sandmel argues that the author betrays no interest in or antagonism towards living Judaism, arguing that he 'seems not concerned with a relationship to the Judaism or the Jews of the age when it was written (as are the Gospels), but with the ancient

¹⁰ cf. Wrege, H, -Th, *Wirkungsgeschichte des Evangeliums. Erfahrungen, Perspektiven und Möglichkeiten* (Göttingen, 1981); Gnllka, J, 'Die Bedeutung der Wirkungsgeschichte für das Verständnis und die Vermittlung biblischer Texte' in *Dynamik im Wort* (Stuttgart, 1983); Luz, U, 'Wirkungsgeschichtliche Exegese' *TThZ* 2 (1985) 18-32. E. A. Russell writing of anti semitism in Matthew argues that one must not judge Matthew on the effect his Gospel has had on generations almost two thousand years later ...'if the gospel has been misused or misrepresented in church history, this does not imply or suggest necessarily that it is Anti-Semitic'; rather Matthew must be studied in his own context and by his own purpose which was to cater for catechetical and pastoral needs. His polemic against the Pharisees must be considered in that context, 'as a safeguard for the faithful over against what would distort the way of Jesus and obscure the real Christ.'

Judaism of Scripture'¹¹ and so by and large exonerates the author from the charge of anti-Judaism. This view would be shared by some scholars who argue that the author is not dealing with the challenge of contemporary Judaism, but rather dealing with a general 'faith crisis', as Laub puts it,¹² usually associated with a delay in the Parousia and the general lassitude which is characteristic of second and third generation Christians who face a tension between eschatological hope and the actual course of history with its pressures for the faithful.¹³ William Lane, for example, argued that the recipients had already suffered under Claudius in Rome and were now facing danger again, with the result that they were tempted to grow lax in their commitment to the Christian message.¹⁴

On the other hand, the view that the author was in some manner engaging with the Judaism of his day would be held by the majority of scholars.¹⁵ Hunt, for example, argued that the title

¹¹ Sandmel, *Antisemitism* p. 120

¹² Franz Laub, *Bekennntnis und Auslegung. Die paränetische Funktion der Christologie im Hebräerbrief*, (Regensburg: Verlag Pustet, 1988) p. 3f.

¹³ Weiss Comm, 1991 p 73. 'In diesem Sinne ist auch der Hebr Dokument für das Problem der "Parusieverzögerung" im Sinne des Problems der "sich dehnenden Zeit"'; cf. too A. Strobel *Comm*, 1991 who thought that the crisis lay in the delay of the Parousia. The author does not give a new meaning to it (like Paul and the Synoptics), but 'mit lebhafter Naherwartung reagiert und der angeschriebenen Gemeinde die Notwendigkeit der Ausdauer einschärft'. p. 15.

¹⁴ Lane, *Comm*, 1991 vol. 1. p. lvi. cp Kistemaker, *Comm* p. 16 who thought that they were in a time of sustained peace and had relaxed spiritually.

¹⁵ Cf. Hagner, *Comm*, 1990, Kistemaker, *Comm*, 1984 p. 17, Casey, *Comm*, 1980, p. xii, Morris, *Comm*, 1983 p. 12, Mathias Rissi, *Die Theologie des Hebräerbriefes: ihre Verankerung in der Situation des Verfassers und seiner Leser*, (Tübingen: Mohr, 1987) (on p. 11 he suggested they may previously have been priests or Essenes), Bénéteau, *Comm*, 1989 p. 19, Toussaint, S. D. 'The Eschatology of the Warning Passages in the Book of Hebrews.' *Grace TheolJourn.* 3 (1982), 67-80,

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 'To the Hebrews' should be translated 'Against the Hebrews' because the Epistle was recognized to be an anti-Jewish polemical treatise, which had been chosen and sent (by Paul?) to a congregation which he thought needed to hear its message.¹⁶ He, therefore, sees the book as being written very much in the midst of a dialogue, perhaps *contre-temps* with contemporary Judaism. Horbury¹⁷ too, followed by A. N. Chester,¹⁸ has developed a very interesting theory that the author was a Jew who was in touch with **living** issues of Judaism particularly in relation to the priesthood in first century Judaism. Horbury suggested that 'the antecedents of the priestly thought characteristic of Hebrews should be sought neither in Christianity, nor in sectarian or visionary Judaism, but in the pervasive influence upon Jewry of the Pentateuchal theocracy.'¹⁹ for them, therefore, the Epistle belongs to the cut and thrust of inner Jewish debate of the first century.²⁰

It would be impossible to enter into this debate in detail, but it does seem very improbable that an author who discusses Jewish institutions and figures in every page and who establishes positions which are very relevant to questions being debated in the

Bruce, *Comm*, 1990, Ellingworth, *Comm*, 1993 p. 27 among many authors.

¹⁶ Hunt, B.P.W.S., 'The Epistle to the Hebrews: an anti-Judaic treatise?' *Studia Evangelica*, 2 (1964) p. 409: 'I suggest, therefore, that this so called Epistle is really an anti-Judaic apologetic based upon and enlarging the original arguments by which the devout and orthodox Jew had been persuaded to become a Christian.'

¹⁷ Horbury, W. 'The Aaronic Priesthood in the Epistle to the Hebrews', *Journ StudNewTest*. 19 (1983), 43-71.

¹⁸ Chester, A N, 'Hebrews: the final sacrifice' *Sacrifice and Redemption Durham Essays in theology* ed. S. Sykes (Cambridge: CUP, 1990) pp. 57-72.

¹⁹ Horbury, *op. cit.* p. 68.

²⁰ Many other scholars would see the Epistle's context in first century Jewish debate. Cf. J. C. McCullough, 'Hebrews in Recent Scholarships' *Irish Biblical Studies* 16 (1994) p. 78ff).

Judaism of the first century, was not aware of that Judaism and that all references to contemporary debates are coincidental.²¹

Granted, however, that the author was dialoguing with contemporary Judaism, what was his attitude to it? Was he anti-Semitic / anti-Jewish in his views? On the one hand there is evidence in the Epistle that the author had a very positive attitude towards Judaism. He assumes that the revelation in the past to the Jewish people was God's revelation. The opening verses say that God has spoken in many and various ways to the Fathers by the prophets. There is a general consensus among the commentators that the 'our' added to 'the fathers' found in P¹², 46^c and a few miniscules and versions is a later addition which breaks the alliterative effect²² and that 'the fathers' refers to a larger group of people than the patriarchs ... a group which is partly listed in Hebrews 11. Many scholars are also unhappy about using this phrase 'the fathers' to show that the author and his readers came from a Jewish background²³. Nevertheless vv. 1-2 do state that the message given by the prophets to the Fathers was from God, the same God who is speaking today²⁴ and does, therefore, assume a high view of Judaism (at least that found in the Hebrew Scriptures) both on the author's and the readers' part.

In later sections of the book he demonstrates how seriously he takes this message of God. In 2:1ff he says: 'For if the message declared by angels was valid and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution ...' The 'message declared

²¹ The debate on the Land, the Temple, the Priesthood and, to judge by Qumran literature, were all issues which were very much alive in the first century CE, particularly after the Destruction of the Temple.

²² cf. Braun, *Comm*, p. 19, Weiss, *Comm*, p. 133. Attridge, *Comm*, p.38, Ellingworth, *Comm*, p. 92, Grässer, *Comm*, p. 47; Lane *Comm*, p. 4; Buchanan *Comm*, p. 3; against this Kistemaker *Comm*, p. 25ff constantly refers both in his translation and text to 'our fathers' but does not discuss the fact that 'our' is attested in so few manuscripts. Similarly Sandmel op. cit. p. 121 translates 'our fathers' without further discussion.

²³ cf. Attridge, *Comm*, p. 38; Grässer, *Comm*, p. 57

²⁴ cf. Weiss, *Comm*, p. 135 'Der Gott des Alten Testaments is mit dem des Neuen Testaments identisch'.

McCullough, *Anti Semitism in Hebrews*. *IBS* 20 Jan 1998 by angels' is clearly the Torah (Galatians 3:19 and Acts 7:53²⁵ It is described as 'βέβαιος'. In passages such as Hebrews 3:14; 6:19; 13:9 the word is used in its everyday sense of 'dependable, firm, solid, steadfast' but in view of the other juridical expressions (transgression, disobedience, just retribution) in the sentence and the use of the term in 6:16 and 9:17, most commentators assume that it is being used here in a juridical sense²⁶ meaning 'valid, 'in force'. This validity is then demonstrated by the fact that 'every transgression or disobedience receives a just retribution'. Braun²⁷ draws attention to the aorist tenses of 'ἐγένετο' and 'ἔλαβον' and argues that the author by using this tense is showing that 'das Gesetz gilt nicht mehr'. To draw the conclusion that the author is deliberately using past tenses to show that the law is now no longer valid is to read too much into the text²⁸.

This verse shows how seriously the author takes the law. It is the first part of an *a fortiori* comparison, a favourite rhetorical device of the author²⁹. In such comparisons the whole point would be invalidated if the initial statement were not assumed to be correct both by the author and his readers. Hence Ellingworth is understating the author's position when he describes him as being merely 'cautious about questioning the continuing validity of the old covenant and its accompanying law'. The author, far from being cautious about rejecting the old law is constructing an argument which is based entirely on the validity of the old law.³⁰

²⁵ Grässer, *Comm*, p. 102 n. 23 & 24. It was a common belief among first century Jews that the law was given through angels though there was discussion as to why it was given in such a way. Cf. Attridge, *Comm*, 65 notes 28 and 29. Ellingworth, *Comm*, p. 138. Lane, *Comm*, 37f.

²⁶ Lane, *Comm*, p.37; Attridge, *Comm*, p. 65.N.30; Grässer, *Comm*, p. 103 n.27.

²⁷ *Comm*, p.48

²⁸ So Grässer, *Comm*, p. 103 n.28.

²⁹ cf. 8:6; 9:13f; 10:28f 12:9, 25

³⁰ cp.,. Paul's attitude to the law in Galatians! Cf. Weiss, *Comm*, p. 185 'eine Abwertung des Gesetzes ist mit solchem Verweis auf die Vermittelfunktion der Engel weder im Judentum noch im Urchristentum

In Hebrews 4: 12-13 the word is described in Hebrews 4:12-13 as : 'living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.'

There has been some discussion concerning the reference of the 'Word of God'. While the overwhelming Patristic and Medieval view³¹ would be that the word here refers to the incarnate Logos, Jesus Christ, and though some present day scholars would argue accordingly,³² nevertheless the context of the passage³³ seems to make it clear that the reference is to God's warnings to his people, warnings given mainly through the Scriptures and also given 'in these last days'.³⁴ In the immediate context here the Scripture passages are Num 14: 43 (For there the Amal'ekites and the Canaanites are before you, and you shall fall by the sword; because you have turned back from following the LORD, the LORD will not be with you.") and Psalm 95: 7-11 which refer to God's threat to those who disobey. As Lane points out: 'the reference is to Psalm 95: 7b-11 in which the living, piercing word of God addresses this generation in a critical fashion and poses as the only alternative to faithfulness the option of death (3:17; 4:11).'³⁵ The author then describes the Word of God in terms which are found

verbunden; vielmehr wird hier gerade auf diese Weise die Herkunft des Gesetzes von Gott betont'

³¹ cf. Ellingworth, *Comm* p. 261; Clavier, Ο ΛΟΓΟΣ ΤΟΥ ΘΕΟΥ, *New Testament essays in honour of T. W Manson*, ed. A. J. B., Higgins, (Manchester, 1959), 81-93.

³² cf. R. Williamson, *Philo and the Epistle to the Hebrews*. (Leiden: Brill, 1970) 390, 398; J. Swetnam, 'Jesus as Logos in Hebrews 4: 12-13' *Bib* 61 (1981) 214-24

³³ We are assuming with most modern scholars (including even older ones such as Delitzsch, *Comm*, p. 147) that the passage belongs to the previous section with its exposition of Psalm 95, rather than beginning a new section, as is suggested, for example in the RSV translation.

³⁴ cf. Weiss, *Comm*, p. 285.

³⁵ Lane, *Comm*, p. 103.

McCullough, **Anti Semitism in Hebrews**. *IBS* 20 Jan 1998 frequently in Jewish tradition to refer to God. It is living and active, as God is living and active,³⁶ it is like a two edged sword or knife,³⁷ which is used for the purposes of probing and judgments, as God is the one who examines our hearts and judges.

But it is in his actual use of Scripture that the author shows his great interest in and respect for the Jewish Scriptures.³⁸ There

³⁶ The word group *ἐνεργεια* is in the New Testament almost always used with reference to divine or demonic powers. Bertram *THWNT* Ii 649f. Quoted Grässer, *Comm*, p. 230. n. 37.

³⁷ cf. Ellingworth, *Comm*, p. 262. There is no reference here to circumcision as Hunt, *op. cit.* p. 410 suggests.

³⁸ Interest in the author's use of the Old Testament is intense and it would be impossible to list every reference to it. The following may be consulted: Clements, R. E., 'The Use of the Old Testament in Hebrews'. *SWJournTheol* 28 (1985), 36-45; Flusser, David, 'Today if you will listen to this voice: creative exegesis in Hebrews 3-4', *Creative Biblical Exegesis: Christian and Jewish Hermeneutics through the centuries* ed. B. Uffenheimer and H. Reventlow. (Sheffield: JSOT, 1988) pp. 55-62.; Grässer, E, *Der alte Bund im Neuen*, (Tübingen: 1985); Kaiser, Walter, 'The abolition of the old order and the establishment of the new: a study of Psalm 40: 6-8 and Hebrews 10: 5-10', in *Tradition and Testament* ed. J. Feinberg (Chicago: Moody Press, c1981) 19-37; Loane, Marcus, 'The Unity of the Old and New Testaments as illustrated in the Epistle to the Hebrews', in *God who is rich in mercy: essays presented to D. B. Knox*. ed. P. O'Brien & D. Peterson (Homebush West NSW: Anzea Publishers) pp.255-264; McCullough, J. C., 'The Old Testament Quotations in Hebrews. *NTStud* 26 (1980) 363-379; McCullough, J. C., *The Epistle to the Hebrews* Unpublished Dissertation, QUB, 1971; Meier, J. P., 'Symmetry and Theology in the Old Testament Citations of Heb 1: 5-14.' *Biblica* 66 (1985), 504-533.; Mende, T., 'Wen der Herr liebhat, den züchtet er. Hebr 12:6. Der alttestamentliche Hintergrund von Hebr 12, 1-11; 1, 1-4; 2, 6-10.' *Trierer Theologische Zeitschrift* 100 (1991), 23-38.; Michaud, J., 'Le passage de l'ancien au nouveau, selon l'Épître aux Hébreux'. *SciEsp* 35 (1983) 33-52; Müller, Paul-Gerhard, 'Die Funktion der Psalmzitate im Hebräerbrief', *Freude an der Weisung des Herren: Beiträge zur Theologie der Psalmen; Festgabe zum 70. Geburtstag von Heinrich Gross* ed. E. Haag & F-L Hossfeld, (Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk) pp. 223-242; F. J Schierse, *Verheissung und Heilsvollendung. Zur theologischen Grundfrage des Hebräerbriefes*

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are at least 30 direct quotations from the Old Testament and more than 35 allusions to it. More importantly, however, the whole book is impregnated by the Old Testament. It has been argued that the book is a Homily on Psalm 110,³⁹ or that its structure is an exposition of 4 Old Testament texts (Psalm 110: 1-4; Psalm 8: 4-6; Psalm 95: 7-11; Jeremiah 31: 31-34).⁴⁰ Even if the structure is more complicated than Buchanan or Caird have suggested⁴¹ it is clear that the author bases his conviction about the superiority and finality of his faith on his understanding of the Hebrew Scriptures. Again and again he introduces the text of the Hebrew Scriptures by words such as 'God says'.⁴² This understanding that God has spoken authoritatively governs his convictions about Moses, God's Rest, priesthood and high priesthood, the sacrificial system and the covenant. Even where the author diverges from the local text he had before him, he does so in order to clarify the understanding he already had of the passage, an understanding gained through accepted exegetical methods of his day, not to read a new meaning into the text.⁴³

Finally the author shows his respect for the Jewish Scriptures and tradition by quoting ancient Jewish figures as examples of faithfulness in chapter 11. Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, the People of Israel who crossed the Red Sea, Rahab the harlot, together with Gideon,

(München, 1955); Smothers, T.G., 'A superior model: Hebrews 1:1 - 4:13.' *Review and Expositor* (Louisville), 82 (1985), 333-343.

³⁹ G.W.Buchanan, *Comm* 'the Document entitled "To the Hebrews"' is a homiletical midrash based on Ps 110'.

⁴⁰ Carid, G. B. 'the Exegetical Method of the Epistle to the Hebrews' *CJT* 5 (1959) 44-51.

⁴¹ cf. G.F. Guthrie, *The Structure of Hebrews. A Text-Linguistic Analysis*, (Leiden: Brill, 1994)

⁴² 1:5, 6, 7, 13,; 2:12: 4:3, 4; 5:6; 6:14, 7:15, 8:5; 10:30; 12: 26; 13:5.

⁴³ cf. McCullough, J. C., 'The Old Testament Quotations in Hebrews. *NTStud* 26 (1980) 363-379; cp. F. J Schierse, *Verheissung und Heilsvollendung. Zur theologischen Grundfrage des Hebräerbriefes* (München, 1955).

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 Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets –
 'who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, received
 promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire,
 escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness,
 became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight' not to mention
 the unnamed women who received their dead by resurrection and
 those who were tortured, refusing to accept release, that they might
 rise again to a better life, who suffered mocking and scourging,
 and even chains and imprisonment, who were stoned, were sawn in
 two, were killed with the sword; who went about in skins of sheep
 and goats, destitute, afflicted, ill-treated --of whom the world was
 not worthy -- wandering over deserts and mountains, and in dens
 and caves of the earth. It would be difficult to find a more stirring
 account of Jewish heroism than that found here. The author may
 have been using a source,⁴⁴ but this does not detract from the fact
 that when he is looking for heroes of the faith he turns to Jewish
 history.

But the author displays alongside this very positive attitude
 to Judaism a more negative, critical attitude. What Boyarin says
 about Paul could also be said about the author of Hebrews:

Paul lived and died convinced that he was a Jew living out
 Judaism. He represents, then, one option which Judaism
 could take in the first century. Paul presents a challenge to
 Jews in the first century *I read him as a Jewish cultural*
critic and I ask what it was in Jewish culture that led him to
 produce a discourse of radical reform of that culture'
 (Italics mine)

In carrying out this cultural critique the author of Hebrews
 uses 'sustained *synkrisis* (comparison) to demonstrate the
 superiority of Jesus over' figures and institutions of Judaism.⁴⁵ He
 argues that the message delivered 'in these last days' is superior to

⁴⁴ There has been much discussion about the source, if any, of this
 list. Cf. Lane, *Comm*, p. 322; Schille, G., 'Katechese und Tauf liturgie.
 Erwägungen zu Hebr. 11.' *ZNW* 51 (1960), 112; Attridge, *Comm*, p. 306f;
 Windisch, *Comm*, p. 98-99; Michel, *Comm*, p. 368-72; Weiss, *Comm*, p.
 554ff.

⁴⁵ W. Lane, *Comm*, p. cxxv.

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that delivered 'by the prophets to the fathers'; that Jesus Christ as the Son is superior to Moses who is the servant in God's household, ... 'Jesus has been counted worthy of as much more glory than Moses as the builder of a house has more honour than the house' (Hebrews 3:3); he picks up a Biblical theme from Psalm 95 that the people of Israel who were in the desert did not enter the Promised Rest because God was angry with them and said: 'As I swore in my wrath, They shall never enter my rest' and uses this theme to show that the promise of rest still remains to the people of his generation because it was not enjoyed by the previous wilderness and all subsequent generations. He compares Jesus Christ with the Jewish highpriesthood, much to the disadvantage of that group. This comparison is then carried on with the introduction of the theme of highpriesthood after the order of Melchizedek. He then compares the 'old covenant' which he argues has been made obsolete by the new one (Hebrews 8:13) and finally clinches the argument by showing that the sacrifice of the new covenant, that of Jesus Christ, is far superior to those of the old.

In assessing this negative critique of Judaism, several factors must be borne in mind. Firstly, in critiquing Judaism, the author saw himself as part of that faith. He did not consider that he belonged to a separate and rival faith which had to destroy another faith. Rather he was carrying on a debate 'intra muros', for the defense of his own followers and the persuasion of his fellow Jews. He, therefore, did not look on Judaism as a convenient foil against which he could easily portray the superiority of Christianity.⁴⁶ As a result, in most of his comparisons between his new faith and Judaism, he does not reject Judaism, but rather, as Clarence Tucker Craig, quoted in Sandmel, says, he argues that 'Christianity is the perfect religion because it is even better than the second best, Judaism'.⁴⁷

The aspect of Judaism which he does reject and declare obsolete is the sacrificial system, arguing that it had been replaced

⁴⁶ As happened in much New Testament scholarship in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

⁴⁷ S. Sandmel, *op. cit.* p. 120.

McCullough, **Anti Semitism in Hebrews**. *IBS* 20 Jan 1998 by the 'once for all' sacrifice of Jesus. This rejection of the sacrificial system with its high priests and institutions occurs from Hebrews 7 onwards and is the closest the author comes to harsh polemic. It arises from his Christology and his conviction that all that God had done through and for His people in the past, he was now doing *par excellence* through Jesus Christ. It is possible, however, that this polemic against the temple, its priests and the whole sacrificial system would not have sounded as harsh when the Epistle was written as we might postulate. If a date post 80 CE is accepted for Hebrews,⁴⁸ then for all Jews, the sacrificial system in Jerusalem was a thing in the past. The hope may have been that it would be revived or there may have been token sacrifices carried out in the ruins⁴⁹, hence the references in Hebrews to the sacrificial system in the present tense, but for most Jews, the issue of temple sacrifices would not have been a very live one. There may have been an inner Jewish debate on the need for continuing sacrifices, and hence the need to rebuild the temple as soon as possible, and if that were the case, then the author of Hebrews with his view that Jesus Christ was the once for all sacrifice would have considered himself to have been contributing to that debate. More likely, however, most Jews would have realized that the dream of a rebuilt temple and the starting of sacrifices again was not attainable in the immediate future and they had more immediate problems to deal with. In that case, the author of Hebrews was pointing out that there was no need to work for that dream as a 'better way' had been provided by God. In either case, the polemic against the temple sacrificial system may have been less offensive in his first century context than it may seem to be to our modern eyes.

By his *synkrisis*, therefore, the author is expressing, as Boyarin said of Paul, 'one option which Judaism could take in the first century'. He is declaring that this is God's next step in the

⁴⁸ Cf. J. C. McCullough, 'Hebrews in Recent Scholarship' *Irish Biblical Studies* 16 July (1994) p. 117ff.

⁴⁹ cf. Clark, K. W., 'Worship in the Jerusalem Temple after A.D.70'. *NTS* 6 (1969-70) 269-80 who argues that sacrifices continued until the final destruction of Jerusalem in the Revolt of Bar Kochba in 135CE.

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history of His dealings with His people and uses the riches of God's past dealings, particularly as they are recorded in the Jewish Scriptures, to argue his case. Naturally many Jews of the first century disagreed with him and thought that he represented an aberration of Judaism, rather than a valid option; his own followers, as we shall see, may have had their doubts, but this does not prevent the author from putting his case as cogently and persuasively as he could. As part of an *intra-muros* debate, therefore, the Epistle can be read as a dialogue within the Judaism of that time rather than an anti-Jewish tract.

A second factor to be considered when assessing the anti-Jewish polemic in Hebrews is the situation in which his readers found themselves. He is critiquing Judaism, not as one belonging to a religion separated from it for centuries, but as one in the process of a painful and heart searching separation from it. He is writing, therefore, to and for a group which is in a weak position over against a group which is much stronger numerically and much more confident in its history and theology. It is in this context that one must read his long comparison between Christianity and Judaism, and his belief that his new faith is the next step in God's Revelation of Himself and His plan for the world. If, as many scholars believe,⁵⁰ his readers were in danger of leaving their new found faith and returning to the Judaism from which they were slowly but surely parting, then the best defense against that the greatest comfort he could afford them was a robust statement of the benefits to be gained through faith in Jesus Christ, as opposed to those to be gained through adherence to the previous sacrificial system. Read through these spectacles, the book takes on a very different hue.

Is the Epistle to the Hebrews anti-Jewish? Interpreted by Christians who have been part of a dominant culture for many hundreds of years, it can be read as anti-Jewish, bolstering Christian pride and arrogance. Taken in its first century context,

⁵⁰ For a fuller discussion of the question of the problems faced by the recipients, see J. C. McCullough 'Hebrews in Recent Scholarship' *Irish Biblical Studies* 16 (1994) pp. 78ff.

however, it is not. It is rather a contribution by a first century Jewish author to the debate as to which direction Judaism should take. Within Judaism, the author lost the debate, hence the parting of the ways and the development of two separate world religions. In carrying out that debate, however, the author used every weapon at this disposal, including, in our argument, the most important argument of all, that of representing as fairly as circumstances allowed the opinions and viewpoints of his opponents.

J. C. McCullough.

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E.T. Mullen, Jr., *Ethnic Myths and Pentateuchal Foundations: a New Approach to the Formation of the Pentateuch*. Society of Biblical Studies Semeia Studies; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997.

This volume complements an earlier study by Mullen on the Deuteronomistic History, entitled *Narrative History and Ethnic Boundaries: The Deuteronomistic Historian and the Creation of Israelite National Identity* (SBLSS: Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993), in which he argues that the books of Deuteronomy to Kings were composed in order to create an ethnic identity for those who, under the control of the Persian government, became the main inhabitants of Jerusalem at the beginning of the fifth century BC. In this present work, Mullen proposes that the books of Genesis to Numbers were written with a similar purpose and appended to the Deuteronomistic History in order to produce a 'primary history' comprising Genesis to Kings.

In coming to this conclusion Mullen builds upon two recent trends in the study of the Old Testament, both of which are controversial and the subject of ongoing debate. First, he dismisses the Documentary Hypothesis advocated over a century ago by Graf, Kuenen and Wellhausen, preferring to side with a handful of recent writers who have suggested that the main redaction of the Pentateuch, or strictly speaking the Tetrateuch, should be dated after the composition of the Deuteronomistic History. Second, Mullen follows a relatively small, but vociferous, group of academics who consider the books of Genesis to Kings to be largely fictitious, and of little or no historical value for reconstructing the history of Israel prior to the sixth/fifth century BC. In suggesting that the Pentateuch was composed to create an ethnic identity for a newly formed Judaeon society in the Persian period, Mullen develops in much more detail an idea that has been expressed recently in embryonic form by both P.R. Davies and T.L. Thompson. Given the foundations upon which Mullen builds his entire study, it is noteworthy that he devotes little attention to evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of these new developments. Indeed, the absence of any detailed critique of either

development makes this volume very one-sided; the reader will search in vain for a balanced discussion of the fundamental issues that underlie Mullen's thesis. Opponents of these new trends and/or those advocating alternative approaches, of whom there are many, are ignored. One senses that Mullen knows of their existence but finds it more convenient to avoid interacting with them; to do so would highlight the tentative nature of his proposals. By failing to interact with competent scholars who adopt viewpoints at odds with his own, Mullen displays little regard for sound scholarship.

Apart from the dubious foundations upon which Mullen builds his thesis, he occasionally stretches the evidence too far in his desire to locate the composition of the Tetrateuch/Pentateuch in the Persian period. For example, concerning the account of God placing a 'sign' upon Cain in Genesis 4, he remarks:

For those exiled to the east, located in Babylon or Persia, distinguished from others by their particular religious "signs," such a story could only provide a type of support for a group fearing death and assimilation at the hands of strangers. Yahweh would take a perfected form of vengeance on any who would kill his specially designated people (p. 110).

Similarly, Mullen suggest that the story of the birth of Esau and Jacob, and especially God's remark that they would become two peoples with the older serving the younger, 'carries important implications for a disenfranchised people who had no national identity and whose very ethnic identity was in danger of assimilation to the surrounding culture' (p. 147). Later, he concludes in relation to the book of Numbers that the generation of adults who came out of Egypt and died in the wilderness represents those who did not go into 'exile' but remained in Jerusalem, whereas the new generation that enters the promised land represents those who returned from 'exile'. The Numbers story shows 'how Yahweh himself had once rejected an entire generation, transferring his promise to another' (p. 267). It need hardly be said that such explanations lack credibility, and do little to enhance Mullen's thesis.

In spite of these negative observation, however, we must be careful not to throw the baby out with the bath water. Mullen is justified in understanding some of the Pentateuchal material as being related to the establishment of ethnic boundaries. Moreover, the needs of the exilic/post-exilic community probably shaped, as Mullen claims, the account in Genesis to Kings. Yet, these factors alone do not automatically demonstrate that the events related in the 'primary history' have no historical basis, and that earlier sources were not used in its composition. While Mullen sides with those who reject the possibility of reconstructing a history of ancient Israel on the basis of the biblical materials, such scepticism is unwarranted (cf. the brief but telling assessment by R.N. Whybray, 'What Do We Know About Ancient Israel', *The Expository Times* 108 [1996] 71-74.) For this reason, Mullen's 'new approach to the formation of the Pentateuch' is unlikely to win many supporters.

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